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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests directions, based on the scientist-practitioner model, toward which counseling psychology should move in response to the dramatic increase in the number of stepfamilies in contemporary society. "Stepfamily" is defined as a household that includes a parent-child relationship that pre-dates the couple relationship, thus creating a stepparent-stepchild relationship. "Extended stepfamily network" is defined as two or more households that are linked together by blood or marriage/coupling, and includes at least one household in which there is a step relationship. A section on the reasons why counseling psychology should include the study of stepfamilies and extended stepfamily networks discusses demographic, theoretical, and clinical factors. Ways in which stepfamilies are different from first-marriage, two-parent families are summarized, and many of the common problems that stepfamilies bring to counseling are listed. The next section looks at theories related to stepfamilies. Most theoretical writings are based on a family systems perspective, and most of the writers are either sociologists or clinicans. Sociological explanations include family stress, social exchange, normative-resource, and sociobiological theories, while clinicians tend to approach the topic from a developmental, family therapy perspective. Useful but underutilized approaches include social psychological (group dynamics) and feminist theories. A section on research concludes that there is virtually no empirical clinical research on stepfamilies. A proposed response for scientist-practitioners is offered that includes making theoretical contributions, conducting intervention research, and integrating training in stepfamilies into the academic curricula. A bibliography of theoretical writings on stepfamilies, a syllabus for a three-credit course on stepfamilies in the Counseling Psychology Department, and information on how to order a bibliography on remarriage and stepfamilies are appended. (NB)

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The "Brave New Family Form" Directions for Theory Development, Research, Teaching, and Practice with Extended Stepfamily Networks

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Introduction

With the trend within psychology toward the conceptualization of individuals within their social systems, particularly their families (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, in press), and the concomitant broadening of our perceptions of clients to include their salient social contexts when working with individual or family development and mental health, increasing numbers of counseling psychologists are being trained to work with families (Horne, 1992). "Family" may be defined in a variety of ways today. One type of family being represented increasingly by clients in counseling is stepfamilies. The purpose of this paper is to suggest directions, based on the scientist-practitioner model, toward which the field of counseling psychology should move in response to the dramatic increase in the number of stepfamilies in our society.

In this paper stepfamily is defined as a household that includes a parent-child relationship that pre-dates the couple relationship, thus creating a stepparent-stepchild relationship. This definition includes: co-habiting households with children from a prior marriage/relationship, households of couples with children from a prior marriage/relationship who visit, some gay and Lesbian households, first married/coupled households with a child fathered (mothered) by another man (woman). "Extended stepfamily network" is defined as two or more households that are linked together by blood or marriage/coupling, and includes at least one household in which there is a step relationship. An extended stepfamily network is a combination of the traditional extended family households of blood kin and households linked by the divorce/separation or remarriage/recoupling of parents. That is, with each remarriage/recoupling a family is added, but the divorce/separation of parents does not delete a family from the network because the children remain related to both sets of families. Influences from any part of these complicated families must be considered when working with an individual, couple, or family who are part of an extended stepfamily system.

Rationale

Demographic. There are a variety of reasons why the field of counseling psychology should include the study of stepfamilies and extended stepfamily networks. The first is demographic. At one point in time, more than four million, or seven percent of households with minor children contain a stepfamily in which the couple is legally married. Nearly nine million, or14 percent of minor children live in stepfamilies in which the couple is legally married, two-thirds of these are stepchildren, and one-third were born into the remarriage (Glick, 1989). When households with legally married and cohabiting couples are combined, 10% of minor children are stepchildren (Sweet, 1991). There are 10.4 million residential stepparents of minor children and another 10.4 million stepparents with adult stepchildren (Sweet, 1991). Furthermore, compared to first-marriage families with minor children, stepfamilies have parents who are younger, have less educations and lower family incomes (Hernandez, 1988). The statistics on minor children do not include households with "visiting"

stepchildren, or gay and Lesbian stepfamilies, nor do they include college-aged children, many of whom are emotionally and financially members of their families of origin. When one examines the meaning of these statistics for any particular child, it is estimated that one-third to one-half of all children born in 1980 will live with a stepfather before age 18 (Hernandez, 1988). Similarly, adults have a 50% chance of living in a stepfamily household. Based on prevalence alone, we need to know more about normal development of children and adults in these households, and about successful methods of therapy with them.

Theoretical. The second reason to address stepfamilies is conceptual and theoretical. Large percentages of our clients live in stepfamily households. The structure and functioning of these families are different from that of biological families (Sager et al., 1983). Yet, the assumptions underpinning our family theories and family therapy theories, and therefore our training of clinicians, are based on first-marriage families. For example, family therapy theories assume that the couple relationship is the key to family dysfunction, in stepfamilies the step relationship has been shown to be crucial (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; White & Booth, 1985). This leads to inappropriate assessment and interventions with individuals and with families (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

Clinical. The third reason relates to a ethical issue in clinical training and practice. Many training programs include topics related to divorce, but too often stepfamilies are ignored, conceptualized either as a minor variant of divorced families, or as being "reconstituted," and, therefore, considered similar to other two-parent families. This is a serious error. If we do not teach about stepfamilies, we will graduate students who are ill-prepared to work with a large percentage, possibly the majority of, their clients.

We need to integrate teaching specifically about stepfamilies into various areas of our graduate school curricula. The obvious area is family theory and family therapy. Less obvious is the area of career/lifestyles counseling; remarriage/recoupling creates complicated vocational and lifestyles issues, to which psychologists should be sensitized. For example, decreasing involvement in the labor force has been associated with lower marital happiness for both biological mothers and stepmothers in newly formed stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett, 1988).

How Stepfamilies Are Different

A brief summary of the ways in which stepfamilies are different from first-marriage, two-parent families will be followed by a list of many of the common problems that stepfamilies bring to counseling.

Differences. Stepfamilies that are created from a remarriage/recoupling after parental separation, divorce, or death are born of loss. This often creates unresolved emotions about the dissolution of the first family, particularly when the stepfamily formation occurred soon after the dissolution. A

related issue is the expectation that the adults are "starting over," that the stepfamily will be an improved remake of the first-marriage family, and that everyone, including step relations, will love each other immediately. This unrealistic expectation and the fear of a second "marital failure" make it taboo for family members to acknowledge normal feelings such as anger, jealousy, guilt, resentment.

Of prime importance is the structural difference that the biological parent-child relationships predate the couple relationship. The stepparent has to find a place in the single-parent family culture. In addition, the couple has no time to develop their relationship independent of the stresses of parenting. "Couple time" is often threatening to stepchildren, because they may perceive it as the stepparent taking away their major parent.

When the non-residential biological parent is present, another important structural difference is created--a primary parent-child relationship stretches across two households. When children are members of more than one household, there are many potential logistical, financial, and emotional complications. In addition to the co-parenting issues that post-separated/divorced families have, stepparents' needs and emotions must be considered. A common difficulty is the ambiguity of the stepparent role, particularly when the non-residential biological parent is active in the child's life. In the case of the death of or abandonment by a parent, that absent parent may be idealized by some family members; this makes it impossible for a stepparent to be "as good as" the absent parent.

Also different from the first-marriage family is the potential presence of stepsiblings and half-siblings. Changes in the birth order and sex ratio of siblings can have many practical and emotional repercussions.

Common clinical problems. These structural and psychological differences create unique clinical issues. Some of the common issues are: (a) unresolved loss issues, (b) anger, frustration, and feelings of failure because the stepfamily does not "feel" like a first-marriage family, (c)fear of re-divorce, (d) problem-solving and sharing power with persons in another household(s), who are an integral part of the stepfamily, (e) lack of consensus among all family members about the stepparent role, especially the disciplining of stepchildren, (f) unspoken issues of sexual attraction between steprelations, (g) ambivalence about stepparenting children when one feels guilty for not parenting one's own biological children from a prior relationship, (h) power relations between the biological parent, the stepparent, and the stepchildren that are different from those in first-marriage or separated/divorced families, and (i) legal and financial issues unique to stepfamilies.

Theory

How can we best make sense of the unique aspects of stepfamily living? Appendix A is a bibliography of theoretical

writings on stepfamilies. Not surprising, most of the theoretical writings on stepfamily development and functioning are based in a family systems perspective. Family systems theory is extremely useful in conceptualizing the linked households of the extended stepfamily network, for example, the financial and emotional interdependence between stepfamily households of divorced co-parents. It is also useful in helping us understand the complicated sets of subsystems that exist within and between households, for example, the subsystem of a residential, biological parent and child (the prior single-parent family) within the stepfamily household, or the subsystem of non-residential, biological parent and child that stretches between households.

Most authors of stepfamily theories are either sociologists or clinicians. The sociologists have applied general theories to the stepfamily situation. Sociological explanations of stepfamily functioning include family stress theory, social exchange theory, normative-resource theory, and sociobiological theory.

The clinicians focus on pathology versus the healthy adjustment of individual stepfamily members. Many of the theoretical writings by clinicians approach the topic from a developmental perspective, that is, they attempt to explain how a new stepfamily can form an integrated, well-functioning family unit. Many of the clinical writings include the use of family therapy theories to recommend treatment approaches in working with stepfamilies. Two excellent books on how to work with stepfamily members in therapy are Sager et al. (1983) and Visher and Visher (1988).

An underutilized source of theory that has potential in research and clinical work with stepfamilies is found in social psychology. Group dynamics theory seems especially appropriate, because a new stepfamily is composed of one or more individuals (stepparent and perhaps stepsiblings) who are trying to become an integral part of an ongoing group (the prior single-parent and biological children). This idea is referred to again in the discussion on assessment below.

Also underutilized in stepfamily theory is a feminist perspective (Crosbie-Burnett, Skyles, & Becker-Haven, 1988). The social and economic context of remarriage/recoupling has important implications for family relationships. For example, given the dire economic consequences of divorce for women and children (Weitzman, 1985) and the low socio-economic status of most never-married, single mothers (Hernandez, 1988), remarriage/recoupling with a man of the dominant culture is one of the few financial options open for mothers without careers. When the dimension of traditional versus liberated sex roles is added, the theoretical possibilities for explaining stepfamily functioning are rich.

Research

Similar to the theoretical writings, the research on stepfamilies has been dominated by scholars in the fields of sociology, family studies, and psychology, especially child development (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). The major difference in

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authors between the theoretical and research literatures is that clinicians are noticably missing in the research literature. Few scientist-practitioners are publishing on stepfamilies.

The research has focused on understanding stepfamily development, remarriages, the impact of remarriage on stepchildren, and a variety of other family relationships within stepfamily households and between the linked households of divorced and remarried parents. What has the research taught us? Nearly all of it has been basic research with non-clinic family members. Researchers have identified relationships between a variety of sociological and psychological aspects of stepfamilies, and outcomes such as marital happiness or the adjustment of stepchildren. A complete review of the literature is far beyond the scope of this paper. For reviews of the research on remarriage, stepfamilies and stepchildren, see Emery, 1988; Hetherington and Arasteh, 1988; Hetherington, Hagan, and Anderson, 1989; Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley, 1987; and Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman, in press.

There are many gaps in this literature. Most of the research is done with legally remarried, European-American, non-clinic stepfamilies. Stepfamilies formed by first marriages of mothers, stepfamilies of color, stepfamilies of cohabiting couples, gay and Lesbian stepfamilies, and adult stepchildren and their extended stepfamily networks are virtually unexplored. There is also a dearth of studies of remarried/recoupled households with "visiting" children.

With the exception of Wallerstein's longitudinal, clinical study utilizing interviews (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), there is virtually no intervention research. Even carefully documented case studies are not available. Group comparison studies with different treatment approaches are non-existent. In sum, there is virtually no empirical clinical research on stepfamilies.

Why might this be? First, there are many different varieties of stepfamilies (e.g., stepmother versus stepfather) and many other important factors to be controlled (e.g., length of time since divorce, number of children). This makes group studies expensive and difficult. Second, until recently there has been no assessment instrument that addresses the unique aspects of stepfamily psychology. Traditional marital instruments can successfully assess aspects of the remarriage/recoupling that are common to all marriages, but couples in stepfamilies have additional aspects within the marriage that are not included in instruments designed for first-marriages. Traditional parent-child instruments are also of limited usefulness when working with stepfamily members.

Measurement

The Stepfamily Adjustment Scale (SAS) is a newly developed instrument designed to assess the unique aspects of stepfamilies. The SAS is based on family systems theory and group dynamics theory. Subscales assess group dynamics concepts, such as inclusion, alliances, displacement, role, as well as relationships between dyads of family members, including the non-residential biological parent.

It is a 120 item, self-report instrument. There are forms for the biological parent, stepparent, adolescent, and child. Tests of reliability and validity support the usefulness of the SAS (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). It is available from the author.

Summary

The current situation can be summarized as follows. The numbers of stepfamily members in our client populations has soared in the last 20 years. Clinicians have identified the common problems for stepfamilies. We know that there are important structural and psychological differences between these families and other family forms. Yet the theories we use to train our students are based on first-marriage families. Commonly used marital and family assessment instruments also are based on first-marriage families. Although books recommending treatment approaches are available, there are no studies of treatments or preventive interventions with stepfamilies. Rarely are students specifically taught about stepfamilies, based on the information that we do have from basic researchers. Therefore, we are not training our students appropriately to work with a substantial proportion of their future clientele. Furthermore, this means that clinicians are doing therapy with stepfamilies with no empirical support for their interventions.

The Proposed Response for Scientist-Practitioners

How do scientist-practitioners respond to this situation? An appropriate response includes making theoretical contributions, conducting intervention research, and integrating training in stepfamilies into our academic curricula.

Theory and Research

Counseling psychologists are in an excellent position to advance theory on stepfamilies and test our new propositions empirically with well documented case studies and other qualitative research, single-subject designs, and group comparisons of interventions. Many of us are in the unique position of understanding perspectives and theories that might be integrated in a new way to better understand and help stepfamilies. For example, group dynamics theory, group therapy theories, traditional family systems theories and family therapy theories, social-cognitive-behavioral theory, developmental theory, and feminist perspectives are all within our purview. In addition, contributions from sociology, family studies, and child development should be used to inform our thinking.

Theory development and research with stepfamilies other than remarried families is in dire need. For example, the interface between the structure of stepfamilies and world views, values, and traditions of various ethnic minority families is uncharted territory. Many of the difficulties that gay and Lesbian families and first-marriage families of mothers bring to counseling are stepfamily issues, but are not conceptualized as such. In

addition, possible modifications of lifestyles/career counseling for clients in stepfamilies is a topic in need of exploration.

Coursework and Clinical Training

Before practicum students work with individuals, couples, or families who are part of an extended stepfamily network, they need coursework on stepfamilies. Without this, students are ill-equipped to conceptualize these cases accurately, and will not be sensitized to the unique emotional issues of stepfamily living. (Practicing clinicians can gain this knowledge through books, coursework, and continuing education workshops.) In clinical practica, students should be taught to use genograms with clients from extended stepfamily networks. These are extremely helpful to both client and counselor in understanding the psychological linkages between households. Students should also be taught to use assessment instruments designed for stepfamilies; if such instruments are not available, students must be tentative about interpreting assessments developed on first-marriage families.

Course syllabus. Appendix B contains an outline of a well-developed course on teaching about stepfamilies in a counseling psychology department. It is designed as a three-credit course, taught in a three-hour block of time once a week. As is often the case in counseling psychology departments, the students for which this course was developed had not had coursework in family theory or family therapy. Therefore, the first third of the course was devoted to an introduction to a family systems perspective of individual clients, couples, and families.

In addition to lectures and discussions of the readings listed in the syllabus, whole families or panels of guests representing various stepfamily roles (e.g., stepchildren, stepparents, residential and non-residential biological parents, grandparents and stepgrandparents) were invited to class. This proved to be extremely stimulating to the students, and allowed them to apply theoretical readings to real life. At other times, the simulated families "came to therapy" during class time; this proved to be fertile grounds for conceptualizing "real" stepfamily issues, sensitizing students to the emotional climates of stepfamilies, and modeling counseling with stepfamilies.

Because the most current readings will be desired, specific readings in the syllabus are only tentatively suggestions for the present. Fortunately, three bibliographies on stepfamilies are available (see Appendix C). They include: scholarly publications, popular and self-help literature, and educational materials. They are maintained by the National Council on Family Relations' Focus Group on Remarriage and Stepfamilies. They are updated yearly.

Conclusion

Using a scientist-practitioner model, counseling psychologists are in a key position to integrate and further advance the interdisciplinary theory and research on stepfamilies. Then, clinical studies testing interventions with stepfamilies should be conducted, because we are practicing with this population with virtually no research basis. Given the large

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numbers of stepfamily members in our clientele, it is the only ethical approach to take.

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Hernandez, D. J. (1988). Demographic trends and the living arrangements of children. In E. M. Hetherington & J. Arasteh (Eds.), Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 3-22). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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Visher, E. B., & Visher, J. S. (1988). Old loyalties, new ties: Therapeutic strategies with stepfamilies. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Appendix A
Theoretical Writings on Stepfamilies

Ahrons, C. R. & Rodgers, R. H. (1987). Divorced families: A multidisciplinary developmental view. NY: W. W. Norton.

Bray, J. H., Berger, S. H., Silverblatt, A. H., & Hollier, A. (1987). Family process and organization during early remarriage: A preliminary analysis. In J. P. Vincent (Ed.), Advances in family intervention, assessment and theory (pp.253-279). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1989). Application of family stress theory to remarriage: A model for assessing and helping stepfamilies. Family Relations, 38(3), 323-331.

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Appendix B

Syllabus for 3-Credit Course on Stepfamilies Taught in a Counseling Psychology Department

Course description:

This course will:

(1) Present the psychosocial aspects of stepfamily living,

(2) Present a conceptual basis for understanding families through the study of a variety of family theories & family therapy theories,

(3) Sensitize students to the emotional aspects of post-divorce family living through an experiential component in which students form simulated families (Crosbie-Burnett, M. & Eisen, M. (1992). Simulated divorced and remarried families: An experiential teaching technique. Family Relations, 41.), and

(4) Develop limited practical skills for the assessment & counseling of families.

Course requirements:

Attendance and participation at all classes having read the assignments and prepared 1 discussion question/comment per reading.

Attendance at an additional one hour of "simulated family time" each week. A written journal of "family" experiences (who was present, what happened, how you felt, what is happening in terms of family dynamics, and, at the end, an analysis of family & overview of what you learned).

Paper on a theory of healthy stepfamily functioning (10 pages). (Students choose a theory from the readings and use it to describe healthy stepfamily functioning.)

Written (or other appropriate medium) copy of individual final project, creating a useful application of coursework to your own work setting. (Time permitting, brief oral presentation, also)

Required texts:

Visher & Visher (1988). Old Loyalties, New Ties. Brunner/Mazel.

OR

Sager et al. (1983). Treating the Remarried Family. Brunner/Mazel.

Collection of readings available at_____

Grading:

Class attendance & participation	20%
Attendance & participation in "family"	10%
Journal of "family" experience	15%
Theory paper	25%
Final "written" project	30%

Written assignments MUST be typed or word processed double-spaced.
You are responsible for any information that was exchanged in class even if you are absent.

Schedule

Week 1	**Introduction**
	Demographics
	Glick and others, article on demographics of stepfamilies
Week 2	**Sociological Theory & Social Policy**
	Cherlin, Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution
	Crosbie-Burnett, et al., Exploring Stepfamilies from a Feminist Perspective
	Crosbie-Burnett, et al., Stepchildren in Schools & Colleges (optional)
	McGoldrick & Gerson, pages from Genograms
***	*Make genogram of your family & bring to class*
***	*Paragraph on thoughts about individual project due*
Week 3	**Systems Theory**
	Sedgwick, Family Mental Health: Theory and Practice
	Sieburg, The Family System: Some Analogies
	Keshet, From Separation to Stepfamily
	Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, From Divorce to Remarriage
	Family Stress Theory
	Crosbie-Burnett, Application of Family Stress Theory to Rem.
Week 4	**Bowen's Family Theory**
	Kerr, Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self
	Bradt & Moynihan-Bradt, Resources for Remarried Families
	Structural Theory
	Minuchin, chapters from Families & Family Therapy
	Olson et al., Circumplex Model
Week 5	**Cognitive-Social Learning Theory**
	Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, A Social-Cognitive-Behavioral Model.
	Epstein et al.,Concepts & Methods of Cognitive-Behavioral Fam.
	Leslie & Epstein, Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Rem Families
	Social Exchange Theory
	Nelson & Nelson, Problems of Equity in the Reconstituted Family
Week 6	**Interventions with Stepfamilies I**
	Visher & Visher, Chapters 1,2,3,4
Week 7	**Interventions with Stepfamilies II**
	Visher & Visher, Chapters 5,6,7,8
Week 8	**Interventions with Stepfamilies III**
	Visher & Visher, Chapters 9,10,11,12
Week 9	**Children & Adolescents in Stepfamilies**
	Ganong & Coleman, A Comparison of Clinical & Empirical Literature on Children in Stepfamilies (optional)
	Lutz, The Stepfamily: An Adolescent Perspective
	Crosbie-Burnett, The Centrality of the Step Relationship
	Serritella, Stepfathers--Stepdaughters: Sexual Issues.
***	*Theory paper due*

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Week 10 **Ethnic Minority Family Issues**
Dilworth-Anderson & McAdoo, The Study of Ethnic Minority Fam
London & Devore, Layers of Understanding Counseling Ethnic Minorities

Black "Stepfamilies"
Aschenbrenner, Continuities & Variations in Black Family Structure
(choose 2 of 3) Holloman & Lewis, The "Clan": Case Study of a Black Extended Family in Chicago
Hines & Boyd-Franklin, Black Families

Week 11 **Hispanic "Stepfamilies"**
Falicov, Mexican Families
Garcia-Preto, Puerto Rican Families
Baptiste, Marital & Family Therapy with Racially/Culturally Intermarried Stepfamilies

Week 12 **Gay Stepfamilies**
Baptiste, The Gay & Lesbian Stepparent Family
Hitchens, Social Attitudes, Legal Standards & Personal Trauma in Child Custody Cases

Week 13 **Legal & Ethical Issues**
Sager, Chapter 16
O'Shea & Jessee, Ethical, Value & Professional Conflicts in Systems Therapy
Seymour, Counselor/Therapist Values and Therapeutic Style
Bernstein & Haberman, Lawyer & Counselor as an Interdisciplinary Team
Bernstein & Collins, Remarriage Counseling
Gourvitz, The Stepparent's Obligation to Support a Spouse's Child
Fine, A Social Science Perspective on Stepfamily Law

Week 14 **Closure**
Process simulated families

*** *Journals Due*

*** *Final Projects Due*

(Instructor: See bibliographies on stepfamilies to update readings periodically)

Appendix C

BIBLIOGRAPHIES
on
REMARRIAGE & STEPFAMILIES

Compiled by National Council on Family Relations'
Focus Group on Remarriage & Stepfamilies

Revised each October

THEORY & RESEARCH LITERATURE

Data Bases Searched =
ERIC, Psych Abstracts, PsychBooks, & NCFR's Family Data Base

The current version includes all previous versions and addenda. Contributions and corrections are solicited. Acknowledgement is given to Kay Pasley, Ed.D. & Marily Ihinger-Tallman, Ph.D., who originally compiled this bibliography, to Marilyn Coleman, Ph.D. and Larry Ganong, Ph.D., who faithfully continued to keep the document updated, and to Roy Rodgers, Ph.D., who created the original "on-line" copy of the bibliography.

To obtain a paper copy, send your name, address, and $15, check payable to: M. Crosbie-Burnett, University of Miami, P. O. Box 248065, Coral Gables, FL 33124. (Phone = 305-284-2808; FAX = 305-284-3003)

To obtain an "on-line" copy formatted for IBM-PC (& compatibles) or Macintosh, call Margaret Crosbie-Burnett, University of Miami, P. O. Box 248065, Coral Gables, FL 33124. (Phone = 305-284-2808; FAX = 305-284-3003) There is a $20 charge; this includes the disk. Please specify preferred word processor.

POPULAR LITERATURE
&
EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

These are each available either on paper ($5 each) or "on-line" ($10 each, including the disk). They can be obtained from Margaret Crosbie-Burnett (address & phone above).